

**Draft**  
**National Historic Trail Feasibility Study**  
**and Environmental Assessment**

July 2000



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**OLD SPANISH TRAIL**

New Mexico · Colorado · Utah · Arizona · Nevada · California

United States Department of the Interior ? National Park Service



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*The National Park Service thanks the technical team and others who assisted in the preparation and review of this document. In the interest of historical accuracy, these people generously shared their knowledge of the history and resources of the Old Spanish Trail. The participation of these people has improved the document and will serve future generations well.*

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the feasibility and desirability of designating the Old Spanish Trail as a National Historic Trail under the study provisions of the National Trails System Act (Public Law 90-543, 16 USC 1241, et seq.).

Pioneered by Mexican trader Antonio Armijo in 1829, the Old Spanish Trail was a horse and burro pack route that connected Santa Fe and Los Angeles. In its early years, trappers, slavers, traders, and immigrants used parts or all of the Old Spanish Trail. Other variants of the Old Spanish Trail developed as travelers sought adequate water, grazing, shorter distances, smoother terrain, and safer passage. Over time, multiple, parallel, and intertwined routes developed. Many of these routes followed older trails developed by American Indians, and were later followed by Spanish, Mexican, and other Euro-American explorers. After 1848, use of the eastern end of the trail diminished as the California Trail to the north and southern trails across Arizona became the primary routes to California.

In 1847, the Mormons initiated wagon travel from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. Their wagon road paralleled or overlapped much of the western end of the Old Spanish Trail. Eventually this wagon road became known as the Mormon Road from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. Many immigrants, Gold Rush prospectors, and others used this route as an alternative to the more northerly routes of the California Trail to California, as well as a supply route for Mormon settlements. The study recommends that the Mormon Road be considered either a separate historic route or a component of another trail, such as the California Trail.

The history, background, and significance of the Old Spanish Trail have been researched and analyzed, using criteria set forth in the National Trails System Act, with application of National Historic Landmark criteria for national significance. This analysis is found in the “Analysis of National Trails System Act Criterion B” and the “Thematic Analysis: State and Local Significance” sections of the document. The analysis found that, with respect to the National Historic Landmark theme of trade and commerce and its impact on broad patterns of American culture, which provided the most substantive use of the entire trail (including legal and illegal trade, and trade and slave trade with American Indians), there is currently insufficient information upon which to conclusively base a determination of national significance. With respect to a number of other historic themes and uses that were evaluated, the Old Spanish Trail is found to be of state or local significance. The study team has found that, among historians, there is a lack of consensus as to whether or not the Old Spanish Trail is nationally significant based on the application of National Historic Landmark criteria. This is in part attributed to the relative lack of historical data about this trail as compared to other western trails. Future research, beyond the scope of this study, on the Old Spanish Trail, including further studies of archives in Mexico, may add weight to a fuller understanding of the trail’s use and its effects and make a more definitive judgment possible.

The study has found that, except for Criterion B, the Old Spanish Trail meets all other criteria in Section 5(b) of the National Trails System Act. Each of the required elements of these criteria is discussed in the “Analysis of National Trails System Act Criteria” section of the document.

This trail study presents three alternatives. Under the first of these alternatives, Alternative A, the “no-action” alternative, there would be no further federal involvement, and the routes would not become components of the National Trails System as a National Historic Trail.

Alternative B recognizes the interest in and support for the trail from groups, organizations, and public agencies. In lieu of designation of the Old Spanish Trail as a National Historic Trail, Alternative B proposes ways to give the public and Congress an option for preservation, interpretation, and public use of the trail that could be implemented now. Private organizations and the states could implement this alternative. Federal land management agencies could participate using existing authorities, or Congress could prescribe additional federal involvement.

Alternative C has been drafted in the event that additional information becomes available to further document and illustrate the significance of the Old Spanish Trail. Alternative C would involve the designation of Old Spanish Trail routes in New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California as a National Historic Trail under the study provisions of the National Trails System Act. If designated by Congress as a National Historic Trail, the Old Spanish Trail would be managed through cooperative partnerships with public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and landowners. The federal role would be to set and ensure consistent preservation, education, and public use programs. There would be little, if any, federal acquisition of private land. It is recommended that authorities be enacted so that land would be acquired only from willing sellers.

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